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Introduction – Digital Platforms and Agency

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ABSTRACT This piece introduces a special section on digital platforms and agency. It unpacks the tension between, on the one hand, the imposition of digital platforms upon cultures by immensely-powerful technology companies, and on the other hand, the emergence of possibilities as people work, play, and express themselves on platforms. Cultural studies, which has always concerned itself with structure, culture, and agency, is well-positioned to work through this tension in order to orient scholars of platform studies toward radical critique and political action. The introduction situates the invited works of "Digital Platforms and Agency" in this context, elaborates upon cultural studies' charge toward the emerging field of platform studies, and summarizes the individual and collective contributions of the special section authors.

KEYWORDS agency, digital media, platform studies, platformization, technology

There is unavoidable tension between the two concepts which define this special section: *digital platforms* and *agency*. Popular discourse surrounding existing, evolving, and emerging platforms spin around fears of lost, stolen, or obsolete human agency. Supposedly, algorithms know us better than we do, social media both amplifies and subverts our speech, artificial intelligence has stolen our jobs, and apps have invaded our analog lives from dating to tourism. Likewise, academic discussions of platforms risk positing the figure of the "Cultural Dupe," the feckless human automaton beholden to social, economic, and technical structures. By rejecting the Cultural Dupe while paying heed to those structures,

the field of cultural studies has emerged as a platform for radically reflexive critique. As such, not only does the emerging interdisciplinary "platform studies" field have something to give cultural studies, cultural studies is an especially generative frame of reference from which to do platform studies. The purpose of this special section of *Lateral* is to bring together established and emerging scholars working with and through tensions that mold agents and agency on and of digital platforms and platform studies through and with cultural studies.

This special section does not seek hasty resolutions to shore up the comfort of our critical distance. We cannot pretend that platforms do not intimately weave themselves into the fabric of our lives. Instead, these authors have sat with the tension between platforms and agency as a generative locus for deeper analysis and criticism. Platforms are more than mere conduits for our content. They actively moderate, shape, amplify, diminish, and monetize user-generated content, profiles, and data. The proliferation and interconnection of platforms, a dynamic called "platformization,"[1] scales this mediation to local, national, and global levels. And yet, platforms enjoy brand appeal and, in some contexts, legal protections as neutral intermediaries, imparting an illusory sense of control to users. This "illusion of immediacy," or an appearance of seamlessness co-created through user customization and developer manipulation, unifies human and non-human actors into a socio-technical system.[2] In this way, platform cultures appear as natural extensions of the human. In this paradoxical way, digital platforms are constitutive of but ever-dependent upon the agential expressions of human users.

That platforms strive for their own mystification is manifest in how the interdisciplinary subfield of platform studies approaches platforms as functions. The field defines platforms as user-centered, if not user-friendly, mediators that come into focus predominantly through their interaction with human users. For instance, it is fundamental that platforms do not produce the bulk of the content that users encounter but rather "host, organize, and circulate users' shared

content or social interactions for them."[3] Platforms constitute "users" insofar as users customize platforms through gestures of agency curated by platform institutions and infrastructures. Often employing metaphors endemic to the tech industry, such as "The Stack"[4] or notions of platform as layered system,[5] the dominant wisdom of platform studies has situated human agency as both input and output to the platform, ultimately subordinate to digital architectures.

Cultural studies has much to offer platform studies in order to situate tensions across humanity, technology, and non-human agents. Scholars across feminist media studies, game studies, Black digital studies and beyond have challenged the hegemonic approach to platform studies, which risks reducing the human to an abstract object to whom axes of social difference such as race, gender, and disability are epiphenomenal. Platform studies risks naturalizing Western platform capitalism as the inevitable background, origin, and destination of all digital platforms and the cultures they host.[6] Such presumptions render invisible platforms and agents whose interactions fail to achieve commercially-recognized success, possibly undermining platform studies' efforts to invigorate alternate modes of systematizing digital technology and cultures. By extension, platform studies can take for granted the whiteness of its audiences.[7] Resultantly, calls for attention to social difference *as* infrastructure are met with belittlement by dismissing "relationality" as a vector of technology which the above definitions of "platform" demonstrate it to be. Calls to conceptually separate human relations from technical relations belie a desire for unmarked epistemology that can be easily extracted by mammoth technology companies in concert with, rather than in contradiction with, their business model and marketing techniques. Resultantly, as Audrey Anable writes, the field "tends to reproduce histories and analyses that ignore the complicated differences and relationships between technologies as things and bodies as things—as systems differently encoded by race, ability, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality."[8]

This special section advances these critiques of platform studies by considering social relationality as a constitutive component of digital platforms, rather than a disregardable array of surface-level specifications. What happens to our understanding of the platform if agency appears not as a contained and individuated "possession" of the ideal user, but rather as flows of capacity that constitutively shape digital infrastructure and culture? In pursuit of this question, this section follows the lead of Beth Coleman who considers agency, or degrees of presence and will, as an ethical fulcrum that can orient scholars away from disempowering structures and toward liberatory practices, namely appropriating race as technology.[9] For Coleman, agency is layered and variable, capable of being amplified or diminished from without but not completely squandered. Her conception of agency is formally similar to the functionalist notion of platforms in that both offer a framework to understand how subjects appear as (in)capacious and act upon their ethical inclinations through digital infrastructures. However, the critical difference in Coleman's configuration is that it is the vector of social difference, race, which empowers oppositional work via digital platforms, not the other way around. "The mechanism of race" is not a self-contained object that suddenly appears to subvert pre-existing digital agencies but rather an "array of procedures" which incline toward outcomes such as the disenfranchisement of Black and Indigenous peoples, but can and must be manipulated at all levels of access to avoid such outcomes and, more critically, to engineer radical, subversive, and transformative practice.

Cultivated in the critical soil of cultural studies, a platform studies that theorizes technology beginning with difference can disrupt the protocols of platformization, as Ruha Benjamin does through her critique of design thinking as a technique for diminishing "other forms of generic human activity."[10] To recenter vectors of difference, which hegemonic digital platforms obfuscate, is a crucial step toward generating imaginations and capabilities for liberation. Coleman's work functions as an epistemic platform for scholars approaching human agency as a starting point to "theorize technology beginning with difference," in Neda Atanasoski's and

Kalindi Vora's words.[11] For example, scholars like Bo Ruberg, Aimi Hamraie, and moira williams elucidate how platforms, even those encoded as tools for corporate dominance, bring agential difference into view because social stratification engenders creative appropriations of platform affordances employed by marginalized communities to exercise oppositional agencies.[12] Even though the customizability of platforms is routinely overstated for the sake of bolstering platform capitalism, the fact that communities for whom digital platforms were not designed still make themselves to appear as subjects on/of the platform, testifies to the fluid relationship between platforms, agencies, and the tension between. The ubiquity of platforms and the universal ambitions of platform capitalism render perceptible the ways that agencies contradict and derive, interrupting the mass individual whose dominance retrenches white, abled, cis-hetero-masculinity as default.

The papers presented in this special section contribute to the cultivation of a platform studies rooted in the critical, careful ethos of cultural studies.

Nina Medvedeva's "The Platform-Enabled Durability of Colonial Racial Capitalism in Washington DC's Wards 7 and 8 < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/platform-enabled-durabilitycolonial-racial-capitalism-washington-dc-wards-7-8-medvedeva/> " investigates the promises and pitfalls of Black Airbnb hosts' resistance to racist placemaking in a context marked by profound platformized and spatialized precarity.

Zari Taylor's and Kiara Childs' "Searching for Blackness: #BlackGirlPilates and Racialized Hashtags as Agentic Praxis on TikTok < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/searching-for-blackness-black-girl-pilates-racialized-hashtags-tiktok-taylor-childs/> " explores how Black TikTok users disrupt the whitening of the algorithm by strategically searching for content which centers their experiences.

Nuno Atalaia's and Marianne Gunderson's "Alexa's Monstrous Agency: The Horror of the Digital Voice Assistant < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/alexas-monstrous-agency-horror-digital-voice-assistant-atalaia-gunderson/> " investigates how popular and corporate representations of the ubiquitous presence of digital voice assistants reflect emerging anxieties surrounding data extraction and the penetrability of daily life.

Ziyin Li's "The Platformized Matchmaking Labor: What Do Prosumers Do in Dating Apps < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/platformized-matchmaking-labor-prosumers-dating-apps-li-wiehn/> " develops the field's understanding of platform-mediated intimacy work by detailing the collusion of Chinese traditional matchmaking practices within the increasingly appified dating landscape.

Kelsey Cummings' "'Help Them Keep Doing What They're Doing': Intersections of Agency, Affect, and Capital in the Twitch Subscription System < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/help-them-keep-doing-what-theyre-doing-intersections-of-agency-affect-and-capital-in-the-twitch-subscription-system-cummings/> " interrogates the mobilization and obfuscation of affective, intimate labor through the sociotechnical system of the live-streaming platform Twitch.

Nathalie Schäfer's "Call the (Bot-) Police: User-Led Platform Governance of (In)Authenticity on Instagram < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/call-the-bot-police-user-led-platform-governance-of-inauthenticity-on-instagram/> " interrogates how Instagram users enroll themselves as custodians of authenticity through techniques of digital vigilantism practiced by anti-botting accounts.

E. Chebrolu's "Mind the Gab: A Racial Rhetorical Criticism of the Complaint Against Content Moderation < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/mind-the-gab-racial-rhetorical-criticism-alt-tech-big-tech-content-

moderation-chebrolu/> " plumbs the reactionary "alt-tech" social media platform Gab to excavate the racist conceits underpinning platforms which brand themselves according to a fantasy of free speech.

Finally, Maria Bose's "Digital Agents: The New Politics of Recognition in Contemporary 'Post-Race' Fiction < https://csalateral.org/section/digital-platforms-agency/digital-agents-new-politics-recognition-contemporary-post-race-fiction-bose/> " takes the context of Apple's Face ID as a starting point to investigate the challenges posed to postracial rhetorics within recent novels of ethnicity.

Notes

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11. Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Duke University Press, 2019), 24.

12. Bo Ruberg, "After Agency: The Queer Posthumanism of Video Games That Cannot Be Played." *Convergence* 28, no. 2 (2022): 413–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221094257 < https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221094257> ; Aimi Hamraie and moira williams, "Remote Access: A Crip Nightlife Party," *Lateral* 12, no. 1 (2023): https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.7 < https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.7> .

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